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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: DUMA ELECTIONS: UNITED RUSSIA WINS BIG, COMMUNIST
PARTY TO CONTEST IN COURT

REF: A. MOSCOW 5529
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 5631

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With almost all of the votes from the December 3 election counted, Putin's United Russia party has won 64.1 percent, which will give it a constitutional majority in the new Duma. Three other parties: the Communists (11.6%), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR (8.2%), and Just Russia (7.8%) crossed the seven percent threshold to representation in the Duma. Voter turnout, at 63 percent, was considerably higher than the 55.7 percent recorded in the 2003 elections. Putin appears to have achieved the goals that he set out for United Russia, but the fact that there was no triumphant post-electoral appearance raises questions about his degree of satisfaction. In a post-mortem on the elections, pro-Kremlin politicians and analysts celebrated the end of the '90s vintage liberal democratic parties who failed to connect with the voters this time around -- and whose abilities to connect were systematically circumscribed by the GOR. As OSCE and Council of Europe parliamentary observer missions jointly concluded on December 3, the election campaign was neither free, nor fair, even if Putin's popularity assured a majority win. In the Caucasus, turnout and votes for United Russia were at Soviet levels. Opposition parties operated at a considerable disadvantage. The Communist Party (KPRF) and the Union of Right Forces (SPS) plan to contest the election results in court. End summary.

The Results -----

[1](#)2. (SBU) At a December 3 press conference, the Central Election Commission reported that, with 98 percent of the votes counted, United Russia has won 64.1 percent of the votes, the KPRF 11.6 percent, Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR): 8.2 percent, and Just Russia (SR): 7.8 percent. United Russia expects 315 seats (up from an initial estimate of 313); the KPRF 57 seats; LDP expects 40 (down from the initial estimate of 49 seats); and SR expects 38 seats. The remaining seven parties that participated in the elections together received less than nine percent of the total votes cast and none passed the seven percent threshold to representation in the Duma, meaning that seats represented by these votes will be distributed among the victorious parties. To add insult to injury, opposition parties Yabloko and SPS did not receive the four percent of the vote necessary to qualify for refund of the deposit they paid to the CEC in order to participate in the elections and to qualify for federal funding. They will also be forced to reimburse state media for the radio and television time provided to them.

KPRF Leads the New March of the Dissenters -----

14. (C) The Communist Party (KPRF) has been the most vehement in its condemnation of the conduct of the elections, alleging thousands of violations across the country. Its thousands of elections observers provided KPRF headquarters with a long list of administrative violations and, even before preliminary results were announced at 2100 (local) December 2, party leaders Gennadiy Zyuganov and Ivan Melnikov had embarked on a round of interviews criticizing the elections as a "farce" and "illegitimate." Zyuganov and Melnikov discussed their concerns with the head of the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly team and committed themselves publicly to pursuing every violation through the courts. There is little expectation, however, that their appeals will have much effect. If they are rebuffed by the courts, the KPRF has threatened to "take to the streets" or to refuse to take up its seats in the new Duma. The most likely outcome of the KPRF's current posturing will be angry rhetoric, legal action in an effort to win an additional seat or two and, ultimately, compromise with the Kremlin.

15. (C) In a December 3 conversation, Presidential Commission for Human Rights Deputy William Smirnov told us he believed that KPRF votes had been siphoned off to aid LDPR and, to a lesser extent, Just Russia. The KPRF reaction likely reflects frustration that the gains by LDPR and Just Russia came at the expense of the Communists. Late in the evening of December 2, Zyuganov argued that "objectively" only two parties had enough support to make it to the Duma -- United Russia and the KPRF. A preliminary review of the party's laundry list of violations reveals allegations of misuse of absentee ballots, denial of free access for KPRF observers, and reports of illegal campaigning on election day.

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16. (SBU) SPS and Yabloko also assert massive vote-rigging during the elections. SPS claimed that 40 percent of voters in one polling station voted by absentee ballot. Yabloko representatives reported seeing a bus taking voters with absentee ballots to several different polling stations in downtown Moscow. Garry Kasparov's Other Russia movement reported other instances of multiple voting by migrant workers at polling stations set up in railway stations and airports in Moscow. The NGO Golos noted that the most frequently reported violation on its hotline and e-mail site was abuse of absentee ballots. One Golos observer even managed to have himself filmed voting twice using absentee ballots. It is not clear how many absentee ballots were issued for the December 2 election. Churov announced that the CEC had issued four times the number of absentee ballots issued during the 2003 Duma elections. Golos expert Arkadiy Lybarev told reporters December 2 that 700,000 absentee ballots were issued in 2003, of which 573,000 were used.

Did Putin Win?

17. (C) Putin had decided to head the United Russia national list in the hope of raising the party's profile and increasing voter turnout and, it was thought, winning a mandate to be used in charting his next steps after the presidency. To a certain extent, Putin succeeded. United Russia's 64.1 percent falls between what the party was polling before Putin's decision to head its list and the overwhelming 71 percent of votes that Putin received in the 2004 presidential elections. The opposition and liberal critics have seized on this difference, with Ekho Moskvii editor Aleksey Venediktov arguing that Putin "lost" eight million votes and with former Kremlin Economic Advisor Andrey Illarionov concluding this represented an electoral "collapse." The sixty-three percent voter turnout was considerably higher than the 55.7 percent recorded in the 2003 elections, although turnout in St. Petersburg, home to many of United Russia's most powerful players improved, but remained low at around 47 percent. While pro-Kremlin

politicians and analysts were quick to spin the results as the beginning of Putin's new legitimization as national leader after the March 2008 presidential elections, some viewed Putin's no-show at United Russia's headquarters on December 2 as evidence that he was not entirely pleased with the production.

18. (SBU) The fact that both LDPR and Just Russia crossed the threshold, contrary to consistent polling data that had both parties falling short, has been interpreted as Kremlin sensitivity to "appearances" and the desire not to be seen as another Kazakhstan. While it is easy to give too much credit to Kremlin machinations, the fact that the electoral needle was threaded so perfectly, so as to provide United Russia with the percentage win that would just translate into a constitutional majority is viewed by skeptics as too much of a coincidence.

What Next?

19. (SBU) As noted ref a, the presidential campaign, which culminates in elections March 2, is already in full swing. United Russia has already announced that it will hold its nominating convention on December 17. It is expected that the three other Duma parties -- the KPRF, LDPR, and Just Russia -- will announce their convention dates shortly. According to the timing set by the law on presidential elections, political parties are required to inform the CEC of the identity of their candidates by December 23. Independent candidates have until December 18 to make their candidacies known; and until January 16 to collect the two million signatures needed to be registered to participate. In a December 3 conversation, a representative of the CEC told us that the Commission would examine a portion of the signatures submitted by independent candidates and, if few invalid signatures are found, would certify the candidates for participation. If "many" irregularities were found, the rest of the would-be candidate's two million signatures would be examined. As of December 3, nine persons, including the LDPR's Zhirinovskiy and KPRF's Zyuganov, had announced their intention to run for President.

Demise of Democratic Liberal Parties

10. (SBU) In a fascinating, late-evening roundtable December 2, a large group of Kremlin-affiliated politicians, journalists, and analysts offered an extended obituary for liberalism in Russia. Andrannik Migranyan, Andrey Isaev, Oleg Morozov, Valeriy Fadeev, Nikita Mikhalkov, Vyacheslav

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Nikonov, Konstantin Remchukov, Mikhail Leontev, Mikhail Barshevskiy, Maksim Shevchenko, Aleksandr Babakov, and others saw in the election results confirmation that the representatives of Yabloko, SPS, the Democratic Party of Russia, and Other Russia were out of step with the Russian mainstream. They agreed that December 2 put an end to "the years of perestroika," and that liberalism was foreign to Russia which required, according to Mikhalkov "a vertical of power."

11. (SBU) Mikhalkov accused the "liberals" of "playing in their own sandbox" and not knowing what country they were in. Nikonov agreed that the liberals did not understand Russia and did not want to. If they had examined the Levada polls, he said, they would have understood that campaigning against Putin would not lead to victory, since polls indicated that 92 percent of those people prepared to support the SPS also respect Putin. All agreed that SPS's shift to a radically oppositional strategy was the "final nail in the coffin" for the party. Speaking of Kasparov, Nikonov noted that "the liberals stopped being liberals when they appeared under the banner of (Eduard Limonov's) National Bolshevik Party." Nikonov challenged the others present to "name one country in

Europe where the liberals are in power." Aleksandr Babakov added that the liberals were poorly organized. Remchukov noted that the liberals had "lost the elections before they had even begun," and agreed with Babakov that poor organization and an inability to compromise were at the heart of their problems.

Nod to the Special Case:
the Northern Caucasus

¶12. (C) A selective survey of election results from the North Caucasus suggests, as was the case in 2003 and in the March 2007 regional elections, a full-court press to increase turnout and the vote for United Russia. A whopping 99.4 percent of the voters went to the polls in Chechnya. 94 percent turned out in Kabardino-Balkaria, and 92 percent in Ingushetia. As of 1000 local on December 3, the CEC was showing the following numbers for United Russia in selected North Caucasus and other "managed" republics, which one CEC official said reflected the natural support for Putin that flowed from increased economic well-being in the region:

Chechnya: 99.3%
Dagestan: 89.1%
Ingushetia: 98.9%
Adygeia: 74.5%
Kabardino-Balkaria: 96.2%
Bashkortostan: 83.2%
Tuva: 81.6%
Chukotka: 78.1%

International Community Reactions

¶13. (U) The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, in conjunction with the Nordic Council and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe issued a one and one-half page statement at its December 3 Moscow press conference that scored the elections as not free and fair. The statement, while noting that the elections were better organized than in previous years, argued that close links between the government and United Russia, strong media bias for Putin and United Russia, new election laws, and harassment of opposition parties, as well as the extensive use of administrative resources had placed the elections out of bounds. The British government via a spokesman worried about allegations of electoral malpractice and expressed disappointment with the failure of the GOR to allow ODIHR monitoring. It urged the CEC to investigate allegations of electoral abuses. The EU External Affairs Commissioner said she would await reports from election monitors, but noted that there had been violations of basic rights; especially free speech and assembly rights.

¶14. (U) United Russia was quick to respond to the criticisms. Andrey Vorobev, a United Russia CEC representative, "mourned the fact that such biased evaluations given by such high-ranking people." Chairman of the Duma's Committee for Constitutional Law Vladimir Pligin, also of United Russia, expressed certainty that the election results were legitimate.

Comment

¶15. (C) As was clear well before election day, the advantages given to United Russia, which increased with Putin's October 1 entry into the race, placed all other parties at a crippling disadvantage. Many of the violations alleged by

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the KPRF and others can be traced to a campaign to achieve a high turnout, and the election results confirm the belief of many that United Russia's comparatively poor image reduced the numbers that Putin could have expected had he run alone. In that general sense, the 64 percent won by United Russia reflects the continuing popularity of Putin, minus the

evident unpopularity of the clique who surrounds him, plus the legal advantages enjoyed by any Kremlin project. The efforts made to get out the vote and control the results on election day exaggerated United Russia's victory, but not Putin's majority appeal. The election left untouched the question of what role Putin may seek to play and who he may seek to elevate as President, using his refreshed mandate.

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